

Sunday 25 November 2018

Christ the King

St Andrew's, Cobham, 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.

Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14; Revelation 1.4b-9; John 18.33-37

[You can get there from here](#)

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, and we remember that the Jesus whom we follow now will one day be revealed to everyone as king – in other words, as the meeting of goodness, power and truth.

It's this last element that I would like to focus on today – truth.

In that astonishing scene of Jesus standing before Pilate, when Pilate is trying to work out just who and what Jesus is, Jesus tells him this:

[F]or this I came into the world: to testify to the truth [John 18.37b].

And Pilate replies:

What is truth? [John 18.38]

What is truth? - a weary, cynical rejection of the idea that the truth is there and can be discovered.

The reason I would like to focus on this exchange today is because 2,000 years later, here and now, that same scene is playing itself out again.

The Christian today says: *This is the truth.*

And the rest of our western secular culture says: *What is truth?*

The Christian says: It has been revealed to us that God exists; that he is love itself; that he made the world, and he made us in his image; that we turned away from him and became sinners; but out of his love for us he sent his Son to die for us, so that whoever believes in him will be saved. This is the truth.

Our culture replies: There is no such thing as 'the truth'. The claim that you possess the truth show that you are ignorant and intellectually feeble. Don't you know that every philosophy department in every university in the west, in a process that started with the Enlightenment 200 years ago, has rejected the idea that there is such a thing as 'the truth'? Don't you know that the greatest

thinkers of the west have shown that there is no such thing as an ultimate, bedrock reality that can be discovered and known by all people? And don't you know that our thinking has spread from the universities into every nook and cranny of the first world, so that all educated, intelligent, decent people cringe when you say you possess the truth?

Friends, for those of us who believe in such a deeply unfashionable thing as 'the truth', it is a hostile world out there. And in the face of that hostility, there is a danger we run – the danger of becoming apologetic about what we believe. Although we hold our beliefs firmly, we worry that they sound naïve and intellectually weak to the world, and so we lack confidence in expressing them.

If you have ever felt this way, I want to reassure you that in the face of everything we can hold our Christian beliefs with complete intellectual integrity.

In the face of the philosophers, and the public thinkers and writers, and their followers - in the face of the whole world - the Christian can say with perfect validity: everything I believe is rational, as rational as any philosophy out there; and what's more it provides the best answers to the great questions of life that trouble mankind.

The Christian should never cringe intellectually.

In the short time I have, I hope to try and show you that this is true

Religion and philosophy wrestle with the same three big questions:

- Why am I here?
- How do I work out right from wrong?
- How can I truly know that I know something?

I can tell you that in considering these big questions, over the last 100 years, the world of philosophy has gone down a cul-de-sac where there is no ultimate meaning in anything – a cul-de-sac of despair.

For example, you may have heard of a school of thought called Logical Positivism which said that the only way a statement could be valid was if it could be measured empirically to see whether it was true or false, and since you can't measure statements about God or morals, no statement about God or anything like that could be considered valid.

Then there developed a school of thought based on thinking about how language works – which in essence said that truth was simply what different

language communities believed it to be, within their communities, nothing more.

And then you get to what is now dominant in our culture, a way of thinking called Post Modernism. It says there is no one way of seeing something or interpreting something, and so no one thing is better than another. So, for example, a painting using elephant dung that won the Turner Prize is held to rank equally with the Mona Lisa. When it comes to texts such as the Bible, the claim is that there is a near infinite number of different interpretations, so the text can't be relied on for anything. The principal claim is that there is no absolute truth; rather, there are many truths, each equally valid. If you want an example, we see this way of thought being played out in our country right now in the battle over gender identity – what is a man? what is a woman? Who has the right to say?

At the same time, you have people called materialists, who argue that the physical universe is all there is – there is nothing beyond this, and we live in a closed system of cause and effect, like a big machine. This is what the so-called New Atheists believe, people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris.

Well, it's a mess out there, a philosophical cul-de-sac of life without any ultimate meaning, with people claiming that their philosophies are intellectually sound and Christians are away with the fairies.

But, with respect, when you look at the claims people make, you sometimes feel like the kid in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes.

For example, take the logical positivist view, which is that a statement can only be valid if an empirical measurement shows it to be correct. Well, how do we empirically measure that statement itself? It fails its own test, so why should we believe it?

What about the Post-Modern claim that there is no absolute truth? Well, when you say there is no absolute truth, aren't you stating an absolute truth?

And then the idea that the universe is one vast mechanical system of cause and effect. If that is true, then surely every thought in your head, and every statement you make is just a chemical reaction, the culmination of a very long chain of chemical reactions, one triggering another, like billiard balls. And if that is so, how can you claim that it has any meaning?

I hope this is making sense, and I am racing along. What I am trying to show is that attempts by philosophy to answer the three big questions from a human

starting point, while claiming to be intellectually valid, can end up in a cul-de-sac of meaninglessness and despair.

And so, we come to the Christian response to the big questions.

But we start in a different place.

We start with a presupposition of a loving God who created the world.

You might ask, but how can we start from here? With beliefs that not everyone shares? Shouldn't I start from some sort of neutral, universal starting point, and then try to get back to God?

That reminds me of the joke about the man who gets lost in the countryside. He stops to ask a local how to get to his destination, and the local, after thinking it over for a bit, says, 'Well, you can't get there from here'.

As Christian thinkers, we *can* get there from here.

As the renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga says, everyone starts with their presuppositions, and the Christian has as much right to their presuppositions as anyone else. Everyone starts from what they believe, even atheists, and so we also have that right ['The Analytic Theist' p.312].

AN IMPORTANT CAVEAT! At this point I want to make it very clear that I am not arguing in favour of blind fundamentalism and aggressive belief! Please be clear that what I am saying is that as Christians we are within our intellectual rights to say that we are in possession (as far as we imperfect humans can be) of the truth, the bedrock reality of life. This does NOT mean that we are entitled to go out and be arrogant and intolerant. In fact, it means the very opposite. It means that we can be confident but it also means that at the same time we must be very humble, acknowledging that if there is an objective truth, it is possible that we might be wrong on certain things about that truth. We must be constantly open to re-evaluating our stance, and above all we must be very respectful, loving and tolerant towards others. After all, it is loving others, not defeating them in argument, that is the most important thing.

So we start with a loving God, and work it out from there, following what God has revealed of himself to us in the Old Testament and in his ultimate revelation of himself, Jesus Christ. Working out from there, we can show that the Christian faith is the best explanation there is for all the big questions of life – why we are here, how to choose right from wrong, and how we can be secure in our knowing.

As we do this, we can be confident that it is a completely respectable intellectual position to take.

Never let us feel intellectually inferior in our faith to those who criticize us as fools or fantasists. Yes, let us be humble, but let us be confident as well – confident to stand up with Jesus and say – ‘I testify to the truth’.